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(Re)conceptualizing institutional change in sport management contexts: the unintended consequences of sport organizations' everyday organizational life

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ABSTRACT

Research question: The purpose of this paper is to construct empirically grounded concepts that can aid the explanation of processes of institutional change. This effort is guided by the observation that neither 'structure-centred' nor 'actor-centred' explanations of institutional change are equipped to provide a satisfactory explanation of one of organizational institutionalism's basic assumptions: that organizations are products of and produce their institutional contexts. Therefore, the focus is directed at practitioners' everyday struggle to accomplish their work, and institutional change is conceptualized as an unintended consequence of such mundane 'muddling through'.

Research methods: The text is based on video recordings of board meetings in two sport clubs over one year. Data collection resulted in approximately 33 h of observation data from 17 board meetings.

Results and findings: Analysis shows how sport club boards' interpretive processes of meaning making are instances of unintentional coproduction that plant seeds for institutional change. The creation of such seeds is the result of processes of problem–solution approximation and the use of proximal institutional raw material. This shows how sport organizations are crucial actors in the creation, modification, and transformation of the institutional arrangements prescribing appropriate organizational behaviour and enforcing patterns of interest and privilege. This analysis contributes knowledge on how sport organizations unintentionally coproduce increasing government reliance on sport organizations, professionalization, and commercialization.

Implications: Such knowledge can make sport organizations and policy-makers aware of how unintentional coproduction might lead to the momentum of processes adverse to their needs and wishes.

Introduction

In 2011, Washington and Patterson cautioned against sport management research being subject to a 'hostile takeover' from institutional theory, lest sport management scholars contribute to the extension, rather than reach, of the theory. Institutional change – the creation, modification, transformation, and extension of shared systems of meaning that prescribe appropriate organizational behaviour and enforce patterns of interest and privilege (Micelotta, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2017) – was one topic around which Washington and Patterson (2011, p. 8) suggested that there was a particular 'lack of newer concepts'. Since then, institutional change has been receiving additional attention in sport management research. In line with sport management as a discipline characterized by 'borrowing' (Doherty, 2013), studies have, however, built primarily on emerging concepts in institutional theory, particularly the notions of institutional work (Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2015; Woolf, Berg, Newland, & Christine Green, 2016), institutional entrepreneurship (Andersen & Ronglan, 2015; Bodemar & Skille, 2016; Wagner, 2011), theorization (Stenling, 2014a), and translation (Bodemar & Skille, 2016; Skille, 2008; 2010; Stenling, 2014b; Strittmatter & Skille, 2017). Thus, while undoubtedly contributing to a more nuanced understanding of institutional processes in sport, the conceptual development resulting from these studies has been limited. Sport management research therefore still contributes more to the reach than the extension of institutional theory. Theory, as Corley and Gioia (2011) put it, is the 'currency of our scholarly realm' (p. 12), and the development of new concepts is crucial to maintaining 'idea vitality' (p. 19) in a field. The development of concepts that build on data from and explain sport management practice, what Chalip (2006, p. 15) terms a 'sport-focused' approach, is therefore important for the strength and development of a 'distinctive sport management discipline' (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2013).

Conceptual development pertaining to institutional change in particular is important because the scientific definition of institutional change finds its empirical resonance in a number of contemporary processes of change in sport management contexts. The two most salient and well-documented processes are probably governments' increasing reliance on sport organizations, particularly sport clubs, for welfare delivery (e.g. Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2017) and processes of professionalization and commercialization (e.g. Agha, Goldman, & Dixon, 2016; Gammelsæter, 2010; O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014). The impact of these processes in terms of shifts in accountability patterns (e.g. Sam & Macris, 2014), the creation of democratic deficits (e.g. Sam, 2009), and a replacement of relationships of trust by ones measured by performance indicators (e.g. Fahlén, 2017) continues to motivate research that uses institutional change as a lens to explain their antecedents and workings. This rationale also underpins the purpose of our paper: to construct empirically grounded concepts that can aid the explanation of processes of institutional change.

Our theoretical starting point for this venture is a framework consisting of three components: muddling through (e.g. Lindblom, 1959; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), framing (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974), and heterogeneous systems of meaning (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Empirically, we rely on video recordings of two large and structurally complex Swedish sport clubs' board meetings over the course of one year. The analysis shows that the meaning-making processes by which organizational

actors[1] construct and deal with organizational reality produce seeds for institutional change, and our main contribution is the two interrelated concepts that we construct to explain the processes by which this occurs. *Problem–solution approximation* denotes processes through which organizational actors make seemingly unrelated issues relate to each other, and *proximal institutional raw material*, represents the cultural building blocks (Swidler, 1986) that are the pool of raw material used in such processes. These processes contain seeds of institutional change, but as we attempt to show, institutional effects are largely unintended consequences of everyday organizational activities.

Conceptual background

Early institutional accounts had what might be broadly termed a 'structural' explanation of institutional change, according to which change is viewed as triggered by shifts in organizations' institutional contexts that subsequently transform organizational practices and structures through so-called isomorphic processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Examples of sport management studies that invoke such explanations are Slack and colleagues ground-breaking work (Slack & Hinings, 1992, 1994; Stevens & Slack, 1998) that showed how Canadian non-profit sport organizations underwent change as a result of institutional pressure towards formalization, standardization, and specialization of organizational structures. These studies were followed by investigations that demonstrated how the development of commercial values, systems, and structures in institutional contexts precipitates a move towards corporate models of organizing (e.g. Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Stevens, 2006). Whereas much of this research focused on change in national sport organizations, more recent works have explored the impact of institutional pressures on such diverse phenomena as the effects of local authorities' coercive pressure on sport clubs' adoption of subsidy conditions (Vos et al., 2011), the emergence of disability legislation and services in European football (Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013), the development of global anti-doping policies through bilateral collaborations (Hanstad & Houlihan, 2015), and the implementation of a quality assurance system among Flemish sport clubs (Perck, Van Hoecke, Westerbeek, & Breesch, 2016).

During the 1990s, institutional research came under increasing critique for its allegedly over structural understanding of institutional processes. Institutional research, critics argued, focused too much on 'the effects of causes' (Morton & Williams, 2010, as cited in Micelotta et al., 2017), meaning that the diffusion of practices and structures is taken as evidence of institutional change processes, but that these processes are not in themselves theorized or studied (Zilber, 2008). The lack of theorization of actors and agency was seen as especially problematic, as it made it purportedly hard to explain change, unless the actor is made into a 'cultural dope', a marionette of structural forces (e.g. Abelnour, Hasselbladh, & Kallinikos, 2017; Hasselbladh & Kalinikos, 2000; Hirsch, 1997; Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995). As a response to the growing critique, several 'actor-centred' concepts have been created, with institutional work (e.g. Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009) and institutional entrepreneurship (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2008) having received most theoretical and empirical attention. Quite different from early institutional accounts, research drawing on these concepts explains change as triggered by local, intentional actions that are 'pushed up' to and subsequently change the institutional context. Focus in this

'agentic turn' is thus on 'the causes of effects' (Morton & Williams, 2010, as cited in Micelotta et al., 2017).

Both the institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship concepts rely on an assumption that over time has become known as 'embedded agency'. According to this assumption, agency is both constrained by and enabled by institutions, and agency is thus 'placed in a double bind between actors and structure' (Abelnour et al., 2017, p. 1776). On a general level, the power accorded to either side of this double bind in processes of institutional change is a main distinguisher between the various orientations of institutional analysis. Whereas early accounts emphasized the constraining effects of institutions, these later developments, especially institutional entrepreneurship, grant the actor a considerable amount of leeway in interpreting and changing institutions (Abelnour et al., 2017).

Sport management researchers have also caught on to the trend of 'bringing back the actor' in explanations of institutional change by drawing on these concepts. Woolf et al. (2016), for example, built their study of an elite mixed martial arts gym on the institutional work concept. In doing so, they showed that multiple actors, rather than organizational elites exclusively, were involved in two types of institutional work, both affecting the development of the sport in mutually opposite ways. Woolf et al.'s analysis thus indicated how a single organization's institutional work builds up to affect the entire development of mixed martial arts as a sport institution. The potential importance of a single organization for institutional settings was also demonstrated in Edwards and Washington's (2015) study of the institutional work connected to the Canadian National Collegiate Athletics Association's creation and maintenance of College Hockey Inc. in order to recruit minor hockey players.

Comparatively, fewer sport management studies have drawn on the concepts of institutional entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. One exception, however, is Andersen and Ronglan's (2015) study of institutional entrepreneurship in Nordic elite sport systems. They showed that the scope and outcomes of institutional entrepreneurship activities depend on the characteristics of the focal elite sport domain, of the institutional entrepreneur, and on the timing of entrepreneurship activities. The study thereby speaks to the importance of institutional factors also for actor-centred activities such as institutional entrepreneurship.

Conceptual framework

Three components form the broad conceptual framework that guides our study: muddling through, framing, and heterogeneous systems of meaning. The first component is the newly emerged orientation in institutional analysis that advocates attention be paid to organizational actors' responses to the ongoing demands of everyday organizational life (Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Powell & Rerup, 2017). This orientation purports a focus on the mundane, ordinary activities in organizations and how the muddling through (Lindblom, 1959) of organizational actors produces both institutional reproduction and change. Muddling through, in this context, should not be understood as related to an organization's degree of professionalization. It rather means that incrementalism, adjustment, and manoeuvring characterize the daily life of organizations, regardless of their degree of professionalization. Compared to the approaches outlined in the

preceding section, this orientation is thus not distinguished by its positioning in the structure/agency debate, but by its focus on everyday activities and situations and their institutional effects. In that sense, the approach aligns with 'the seemingly small, inadvertent, and often overlooked acts' that Dowling and Smith (2016, p. 406) found to be central in the institutional work related to the construction and maintenance of a new organization.

The concept of framing (Goffman, 1974) forms the second theoretical starting point for our conceptualization of the institutional effects of actors' dealings with daily organizational life. Framing, in this context, denotes the collective and active construction of meaning in social settings (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014), and the concept therefore captures the ideational aspects of the processes by which organizational actors construct and deal with organizational reality and the demands continuously placed on an organization. As a further operationalization, we build on Entman's (1993) definition of framing as a process that renders some aspects of reality more salient by promoting certain problem definitions, causal interpretations, and solutions.

Situated in an institutional outlook, framing processes are embedded in, reproduce, and transform macro-institutional ideas: wider systems of meaning that constitute the institutional contexts of organizations (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Gray et al., 2015). As referred to in the introduction, notions of professionalism and of the exchange-value of sport are key examples of such macro-institutional ideas in a sport context. The recursive view of framing processes aligns with the first component of our conceptual framework, which holds that organizational processes produce both continuity and change. The systems of meaning that make up institutional contexts are the cultural building blocks (Swidler, 1986) or raw material (Glynn, 2008) available in the construction of problem definitions and solutions (i.e. framing processes). Put simply, macro-institutional ideas are used as an 'input' in framing processes. The problem–solution construction of such processes, and the talk, decisions and actions associated with it, constitute the 'output' that produces either institutional reproduction or change.

Our third theoretical component is the assumption that such raw material is inherently pluralistic (e.g. Kraatz & Block, 2008), an assumption that is validated by the numerous studies conducted within the institutional logics perspective that has shown the complexity of sport organizations' institutional contexts and their effects on organizing (e.g. Gammelsæter, 2010; Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Southall, Southall, & Dwyer, 2009).

Whereas there is habit and routine in the framing processes connected to the accomplishment of ordinary work, they simultaneously involve a considerable amount of 'mindful reflection, effort and manoeuvring' (Powell & Rerup, 2017, p. 213). Aligned with the phenomenological roots of institutional theory (Schütz, 1967), the interpretive work of everyday life is thus both intentional, purposive, and skilful. In alignment with our first component, we assume, however, that the goal of such interpretive work is to solve the 'local' problems and puzzles that characterize organizational life, rather than to achieve institutional reproduction or change. Thus, framing processes and their associated actions, as we will attempt to show, contain the seeds to institutional change, although their effects in terms of such are largely unintended (Powell & Rerup, 2017).

Research approach

Our conceptual framework generated considerations around three specific design aspects. First, our understanding of institutional reproduction and change yielded a need for an organizational arena in which 'input' from the institutional context is taken care of by way of framing and thereby converted to 'output' that has potential institutional effects. Because board meetings are the primary and formal arena for sport governance (Walters & Tacon, 2018), we assumed that they would be a key site for such processes. Selecting sport clubs specifically rested on the assumption that by constituting the base of member-based and federative sport systems, sport clubs are sites in which the very foundation of sport governance is constituted. They are also, by far, the most common type of sport organization in many sport systems. Because more complex and conflicting institutional contexts hold more potential for institutional change (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Micelotta et al., 2017), we recruited clubs on the criteria that they are relatively large, display a breadth of activities, and have a wide variety of stakeholders. We assumed that this would lead us to clubs that are subjected to heterogeneous institutional contexts. Because multiple data sites provide a stronger base for conceptual development (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), we decided to include two clubs in the study, hereafter termed SC 1 and SC 2.

Our second consideration was connected to the challenge of empirically capturing 'daily affairs and the people who conduct them' (Powell & Rerup, 2017, p. 311). To resolve this challenge, we needed a method that allowed us to move closer to the micro level of framing processes, as advised by Cornelissen and Werner (2014). Compared to conducting interviews or taking field notes, we made the assumption that video recordings would enable us to better capture the detail and nuance of the meaning-making that occurred during board meetings (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010).

Our third consideration was related to the insight that 'institutional change is inherently a longitudinal process' (Micelotta et al., 2017, p. 11). This prompted us to follow few clubs, but over a longer period of time. 'Longitudinal' is admittedly an ambiguous concept, but in this context, it simply refers to the recording of a number of consecutive board meetings that allows attention to how issues develop over time in an organization (rather than to how a specific issue unfolds in multiple organizations). Since many sport governance issues per definition unfold in annual cycles (e.g. board members' terms of reference, the construction of financial accounts, budgets, and business plans), we decided to follow each club for one full year.

Data collection

Adhering to common ethical standards, all board members of the two recruited sport clubs were informed about the purpose of the project, their anonymity, and their right to discontinue participation at any time. The actual observations implied placing a video camera in the room wherein each board meeting was held. By not being present in the room during the meetings, we aimed at reducing possible observer effects (McDonald, 2005). Following the sport clubs a full year each resulted in the

video recording of nine meetings in SC 1 and eight meetings in SC 2, together constituting approximately 33 hours of video-recorded observation data, which were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The transcripts were analysed in three steps, following the so-called Gioia-method (e.g. Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). First, we inductively coded all text into 'issues'. Our point of departure for this step was to take the board members' perspective in an initial mapping of what boards talk about during their meetings. By employing the comparing/contrasting technique (Charmaz, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994), we scrutinized each segment of text, guided by the analytical question: when do they start to talk about something different? This analysis resulted in 36 issues in SC 1 and 18 issues in SC 2 (displayed in Table 1 in the supplemental file).

The large amount of data collected needed to be condensed to allow further analysis. In a second step, we therefore applied the meaning concentration technique (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Through this process, we achieved terse and manageable descriptions of the treatment of each issue over the studied period, and thus an insight into during how many meetings each issue was part of discussions. As part of this step, we also noted which internal (e.g. members in general, administrators, and leaders) and external (e.g. the local authorities, competing clubs, and sponsors) actors were referred to in the treatment of each issue during each of the recorded meetings. Approximately two-thirds of the actors overlap for both clubs, whereas SC 1 in addition discusses 25 actors not mentioned by SC 2 (displayed in Table 2 in the supplemental file).

The result of the second step of the analysis was a data display in the form of a matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that subsequently constituted the basis for the third analytical step. In this final step, we analysed how issues were framed in relation to each other. That is, how does the framing of one issue 'feed into' or 'paste to' the meaning-making of subsequent issues through the construction and coupling of problems and solutions. Tables 1 and 2 display the result of this step of the analysis for SC 1 and 2, respectively, while simultaneously constituting the main basis for assessing the transparency and credibility of our analysis.

As guidance in interpreting the tables, if read row-wise, Table 1 shows how in SC 1 issue 1 is discussed during meetings 1, 4, and 6. The meaning-making pertaining to issue 1 also feed into the framing of issue 23, specifically during meeting 4. If instead read column-wise, Table 2 shows how during meeting 4, the board discusses issue 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 18, 19, 23, 29, and 30 and that issue 23 feed into the treatment of issue 1, issue 3 into the treatment of issue 7, and so on.

From this third step, we constructed two illustrations to showcase the particularities of our conceptualization of the potential institutional effects of actors' dealings with daily organizational life. The illustrations were constructed on the basis of the interconnectedness displayed in Tables 1 and 2 using bold emphasis. Between them, the illustrations contain distinctly different issues, yet they illustrate the same conceptualizations. These conceptualizations, which are the main contribution of our analysis, will be defined and discussed in the Discussion.

Table 1. The longevity and interconnectedness of issues discussed during the board meetings of Sport Club 1.

Issue	Meeting								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	x			23		x			3
2	x		6, 19, 27		6, 19, 30			x	
3	4	2, 6, **7**	2, **7**, 16		6, 13	3, 36	14	9	13
4	3, 18	3			3, 30	3	3, 9	30	3
5	3, 6, **7**								
6	3	x		x					
7	3, 6	3, **18**		3	3, **18**	3			3, **5**
8	3	x		x	x				
9	3			3					
10		16							
11	x	x			x		x		
12	x								
13	x								
14	3, 31	3, 31	3		3	x	3		3, **18**
15									
16	x	3, 11, 13							
17		x							
18		26	x	x	x				
19		6	3, 6	6					
20		x							
21	6								
22		x							
23			1, 6	1					
24									
25			35		x				
26			**18**						
27			x			2	6	2, 30	x
28									
29				x					
30				3		3	3		3
31					3	3, 14	3, **18**	6, 32	x
32					2, 3, 9, 19, 27	6, 27, 36		2, 3, 6	
33					x	3			
34							3, 4, 27	3	3, 30
35					25				
36								3	3, 9, 27, 30

Note: x symbolizes incidence; numbers (1–36) symbolize how the specific issue discussed is connected to other issues; **bolded** numbers highlight the issues used to construct narrative 1.

Table 2. The longevity and interconnectedness of issues discussed during the board meetings of Sport Club 2.

Issue	Meeting							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	3, **9**							
2	**4**, 6	**4**	**4**	**4**	**4**	6		
3	1							
4	6, 7, **12**	6, 7, **8**, 12	**12**	5, 6, 7, **8**, 12	5, 6, 7, 12	5	5, 7, **8**, 10, **12**	
5	**8**	4	4, **8**, 12	x				
6	x	4, 7, **8**	x	x	4, 7	4, 5, 7, **9**	**9**	
7	6	4, **9**	1, **9**		6	6	x	
8		4	1, 6, 7, **9**	6, 7	7	1, 7		
9			6				6, **8**	
10			4, 7, **8**	4	4	x		
11			**8**, **9**	8				
12			x	x	4			
13			11, 14	4, **12**				
14			1	4, **8**				
15			x					
16			6, 10	x				
17			7	x	2, **4**	4	x	x
18					2, 7, **8**, 17	6		

Note: x symbolizes incidence; numbers (1–18) symbolize how the specific issue discussed is connected to other issues; **bolded** numbers highlight the issues used to construct narrative 2.

Findings

At a conceptual level, the two illustrations below show how an issue, upon entry into the boardroom, is bestowed cultural meaning from a particular macro-institutional idea. The illustrations also show how the meaning making processes that the boards engage in to frame the issue as a problem and its solution leads to the conferring of cultural meaning to a completely different macro-institutional idea. Table 3 provides an overview of the meaning-making processes of illustration 1 and 2. Specifically, for each of the illustrations, Table 3 shows: (1) how an issue was raised by the board; (2) how the issue was bestowed cultural meaning from a particular macro-institutional idea; (3) how seemingly unrelated issues were made relevant in these meaning-making processes; (4) how this coupling of problems and solutions produces talk, text, and actions; and (5) how this outcome is a potential seed of institutional reproduction and change because it confers cultural meaning to a different macro-institutional idea.

Illustration 1: from workplace inspection to immigrant integration (Sport club 1)

This illustration begins with an issue that is bestowed cultural meaning by the macro-institutional idea that prescribes increasing regulation of a previously unregulated societal sector (Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2017), a workplace inspection of the club's premises (SC 1, Issue 5, Table 1 in the supplemental file). This inspection was recently conducted by the club employees' union and resulted in a number of comments related to various aspects of the physical work environment in need of improvement. As a response to the inspection, the club has written a report that specifies how each of the deficiencies is to be addressed. In that sense, the club's

Table 3. The unintentional coproduction of institutional change through mundane micro-acts of agency.

	Narrative 1	Narrative 2
1. The issue is being raised as a question of …	a. A need to address complaints made by the work environment inspection.	a. Recruiting new players for the next season.
2. The issue is bestowed cultural meaning from the particular macro-institutional idea of …	b. General regulative trends, i.e. the prescribed regulation of a previously unregulated societal sector.	b. Professionalization, i.e. salaried players are needed in strengthening sporting competitiveness.
3. In the meaning-making processes in which the board engages to frame the problem connected to the issue, the board makes a seemingly unrelated issue relevant as a solution by …	c. Coupling the problem of neglected maintenance with the possibility to finance renovations by arranging daytime activities.	c. Coupling the problem of financing 'high-profile' players with the possibility to increase funding from the local authorities' *and* to 'sweeten' the deal for potential recruits by offering housing and side-line jobs.
4. This coupling of problems and solutions produces concrete talk, text and action in terms of …	d. An integration project for asylum seekers.	d. An accumulation of rental agreements for housing recruited players and offering players as workforce to local business partners.
5. The unintended consequence of this meaning-making process is that the board confers cultural meaning to another macro-institutional idea:	e. The governmentalization of sport, i.e. an idea that prescribes governments' increasing reliance on sport organizations for welfare delivery	e. The commercialization of sport, i.e. the commodification of players and their accommodation to improve financial competitiveness.

Note: The table should be read starting in the upper left corner and then by treating each issue separately. Accordingly, the reading of narrative 1 should follow this sequence: 1, a; 2, b; 3, c; 4, d; 5, e.

actions reproduce regulation as a macro-institutional idea. However, in preparing the report, the chair and the club's head administrator thought it best to conduct a thorough analysis and inventory of all types of maintenance needs in the club's office, the clubhouse, and an apartment building that the club's wholly owned subsidiary owns and manages. This process leads to a sense of urgency and an interpretation of the maintenance of the club's facilities as strongly neglected and therefore in need of renovations. However, because no appropriations have been made, there are no funds available to cover costs for renovations, and the club's general financial situation does not allow new spending (SC 1, Issue 3, Table 1 in the supplemental file). The club is thus left with a renovation need but no funds to cover it.

The head administrator then links this situation to an idea she got from a discussion with one of the leaders on the possibilities of making better use of the clubhouse (SC 1, Issue 7, Table 1 in the supplemental file). The line of reasoning goes that many groups of people that are idle during the day are available, and should the clubhouse, which is mostly empty during the daytime, be renovated, it could be used to arrange activities for such groups. This would provide the club with the possibility to apply for a renovation grant from the local authorities. One such idle group, the administrator points out, is asylum seekers. Should the activities target this group, the club would also be able to apply for a grant from a national grant provider. Such a grant would cover the costs of the actual project, but would also help cover the renovation costs. The following quote illustrates how the need to raise funds for renovations is initially framed under the label 'Project clubhouse':

> So, 'Project clubhouse', my idea is that we organize daytime activities here in our facilities, and apply for that particular grant that is meant to cover costs for renovations, and we use these grants to renovate and modernize our facilities. (Head administrator, meeting 2)

> I think that we, by working like this [with a focus on asylum seekers], will gain the local authorities' attention, and that would be positive for the club in more ways than one. This is an opportunity to get funds for the renovations, a cost that the club would have to cover otherwise. (Chairperson, meeting 2)

The head administrator is encouraged to choose activities that attract the local authorities to be partners in the project because it looks good to have them on board in an application to the national grant provider. The board also discusses other ways to increase the chances of being granted funds from the national grant provider, and it is agreed that an application to this particular funder needs to be 'unique' in one way or another. The head administrator takes this advice and returns with a plan for a three-year integration project. The project is to be carried out in collaboration with another voluntary sport club in town, and the rationale given for this collaboration is the breadth of activities (i.e. uniqueness) that the two clubs together can offer and the access to the target group the other club can bring to the partnership. The local authorities have also been convinced to allow asylum-seeking students to visit the clubhouse during the day. Importantly, however, at this stage, 'Project Clubhouse' is now relabelled with the use of cultural material that reflects the reframing of the issue:

> We are in the final stages of putting together the grant application for this project. The local authorities have agreed to bring asylum seeking youth over to our facilities during the day. (Head administrator, meeting 5)

> So, is this project still called 'Project Clubhouse? (Chairperson, meeting 5)

> No, we are calling it 'A future for all' now. (Head administrator, meeting 5)

The quote that ends this illustration illustrates how the board understands an everyday problem (i.e. producing a report and finding coverage for renovation costs) and frames a pragmatic solution to it (i.e. the construction of an immigrant integration project whose funding may cover renovation costs), using a contemporary pertinent system of meaning as the raw material. While this problem–solution coupling has great functionality in relation to the problem at hand in the daily life of the organization, the unintended consequence of this intentional and skilful meaning-making is that the organization confers cultural meaning to the governmentalization of sport; the macro-institutional idea that prescribes governments' increasing reliance on sport organizations for welfare delivery (e.g. Harris & Houlihan, 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2017), in this case, the use of sport to integrate immigrants. In that sense, through its everyday muddling through, the organization has lent itself to, and thus potentially reinforced, an institutional change process that has been argued to involve shifts in accountability patterns to the disadvantage of sport (e.g. Sam & Macris, 2014) and the creation of a democratic deficit within sport (e.g. Sam, 2009).

Illustration 2: from player recruitment to employment and housing agency (Sport club 2)

This illustration begins with an issue that is bestowed cultural meaning from the professionalization of sport as a macro idea (e.g. Agha et al., 2016; Gammelsæter, 2010; O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014): player recruitment to the club's elite teams (SC 2, Issue 5, Table 1 in the

supplemental file). Recruiting players to the club's two elite teams (female and male) is a recurring issue for the board of this club. The issue is primarily a discussion about securing teams that are able to compete for championship medals. However, as illustrated by the quote below, the framing of the issue is also distinctly marked by how the board brings forth arguments concerning the importance of finding ways to fund prospective recruitments because successfully recruiting competitive players requires offering them a salary (SC 2, Issue 4, Table 1 in the supplemental file):

> We're currently looking into the possibility of bringing X in, and … it would be pretty expensive. But I mean he is the captain of the national team, and signing him would be a really big thing that would outshine anything else happening in the sport … Some cash is needed to make it happen though. (Head administrator, meeting 1)

By constructing the issue as a matter of funding, the board brings up a number of actors in these discussions (SC 2, Issue 8, Table 1 in the supplemental file). These actors are not necessarily connected to the issue of player recruitments per se (such as players, agents, and competing clubs would be), but by framing the issue as a financial problem, the board turns the discussion into considerations about ways to fund the coveted players and thereby connects the discussion to possible financiers. In doing so, the board makes the issue a matter of relating specific recruitment to an estimated cost and to a specific partner possibly willing to help in covering that cost. In the case of recruiting the captain of the national team, for example, the board discusses the value of recruiting international 'high-profile' players vis-à-vis the local authorities' (one of the club's major sponsors) ambition to gain exposure in national media (to boost tourism and in-migration). The notion is that recruiting an international 'superstar' would be beneficial for the club in not only competitive but also financial terms because such a recruitment would render more media coverage (which is measured by the local authorities), in turn securing and possibly increasing future funding:

> Should we be able to sign this player, I mean, it would be in every Swedish newspaper. And that'd be good for us too. The local authorities conduct their annual review of how much visibility we have, and even though it is difficult to say how much it would be worth in sponsorship negotiations, we would gain standing in that review if we make this recruitment. (Head administrator, meeting 1)

However, because this source of funding is not sufficient to secure a recruitment such as this one, the board also discusses other incentives. One of them is to offer housing to potential recruits, and another is to arrange possibilities for side-line jobs (in the sport in which the club competes, playing professionally is not sufficient for making a living; thus, having a second income 'on the side' is necessary; SC 2, Issue 12, Table 1 in the supplemental file). To be able to offer housing, board members are encouraged to make use of personal contacts with local property owners to get hold of rental agreements the club can use to facilitate players moving to the city in which the club resides. The following quote portrays one of several discussions on this topic:

> We have huge problems finding work and apartments, so that's one thing that I need everyone in the board to make a note of in order to remember to keep your eyes open for opportunities and think through if you have any contacts. […] Is there anyone that you can call and say 'seriously, you guys can dig up two more apartments for us, right?' (Head administrator, meeting 3)

One result of these efforts is that the club, on any given day, is the legal tenant of 5–10 apartments. Another result, and a consequence of the first, is that the club has contracts on apartments on the way to being converted into co-operative apartments. This has already proven to be a lucrative arrangement for the club because these, in turn, can be sold for a good profit. Similarly, to be able to offer side-line jobs, board members are encouraged to utilize personal contacts with local businesses that the club can use to help recruited players increase their income, thereby making the contracted time more financially attractive. The following quote illustrates how the head administrator constructs interpretive tools in the form of ready-made arguments that can be used if board members manage to facilitate meetings with potential buyers of their human resource services:

> If you know a grocery store owner or something like that, set up a meeting with him/her where I can say 'you unpack goods six days a week, how about one or two from our club do four hours of work each day', we bill them less than what it would normally cost them, and we would still gain from it, because that player will be cheaper for us. It's a win-win situation. (Head administrator, meeting 3)

The above illustration again illustrates the meaning-making processes by which the board constructs solutions to the everyday struggle of keeping the elite teams up and running. Because the board links the idea of being competitive with the idea of the *paid* professional, the hiring of players by necessity creates a need to raise funds to cover salaries and to find side-line jobs and accommodation to increase the attraction of signing with the club. The construction of the pragmatic and creative solutions to this reoccurring problem, however, results in the club increasingly acting as an employment and housing agency (and in some cases, a real-estate dealer!), a particular form of commercialization of the club's assets. Because of the cultural raw material used in the meaning-making processes the board engages in as it muddles through, the coupling of problems and solutions adds to the process of institutional change that prescribes commercialization as a prerequisite for the professionalization of sport (Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Slack & Hinings, 1992, 1994; Stevens, 2006; Stevens & Slack, 1998).

Discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to construct empirically grounded concepts that can aid the explanation of processes of institutional change. In the following, we present and discuss the two concepts that together explain the workings and potential institutional effects of muddling through in contemporary sport organizations: pools of proximate institutional raw material, and problem–solution approximation.

Pools of proximal institutional raw material

At the outset, we emphasize that understanding organizational life as characterized by muddling through is not intended to mean that such processes are institutionally disembedded—quite the contrary. The day-to-day framing processes (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) through which organizational reality is accomplished by necessity make use of available cultural material (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Gray et al., 2015). Organizational

actors, like any type of social actor, act in a 'socio-historical a priori' that makes available 'institutionalized typifications, frames of interpretation, actor positions, patterns of action etc., and thus delineates the boundaries and the "horizon" within which people can meaningfully act – and beyond which it is impossible to see or understand' (Meyer, 2008, p. 521). We thus question the possibility of creating 'something from nothing' (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 331), as has been suggested elsewhere in the institutional literature. We instead maintain that creating cultural meaning 'from scratch' is not possible; only (re)construction of already existing meaning is. Related to the sport management literature presented in the Conceptual Background, we thus argue that the characteristics of the institutional entrepreneur or the timing of entrepreneurship activities, (for example Andersen & Ronglan, 2015), are of less importance when trying to understand processes of institutional change.

We also underscore that for reasons easily understood from a research perspective, studies on institutional processes often focus on single ideas (e.g. Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), thus adopting a so-called follow the idea-approach (Stenling, 2014b; Lindberg & Erlingsdottir, 2005). In a sport context, Slack and Hinings's (1992, 1994) studies of the Quadrennial Planning Program and Van Hoecke and De Knop's (2006) and Van Hoecke, De Knop, and Schouken's (2009) examinations of total quality management in sport organizations are examples of this type of study. Because this type of research design is much used, two misdirected assumptions may easily be made.

The first assumption is that macro-institutional ideas are understood by practitioners *as* macro-institutional ideas. In relation to this, it is important to underscore that the labels of macro-institutional ideas, in our analysis represented by 'regulative trends', 'governmentalization of sport' (Illustration 1), 'professionalization' and 'commercialization' (Illustration 2), are the works of researchers, not practitioners. Hence, although terms such as 'professionalization' may provide an accurate description *of* sport management practice, they are generally not interpretive tools used *in* that practice. Thus, whereas researchers may link a certain action and its cultural underpinning to a macro trend (e.g. professionalization), organizational actors commonly frame the same action in relation to concrete, daily problems, such as, 'We need to recruit players to our elite teams for the next season' (Illustration 1), and without giving second thought to the institutional origin or effects of that action.

The second misdirected assumption is that issues are treated one at a time and in isolation temporally and spatially. As our analysis shows (Tables 1 and 2), and common sense dictates, this is simply not the case. Within the realm of sport, this position is also supported by the numerous studies conducted from an institutional logics standpoint, which demonstrate the inherently pluralistic nature of the raw material that makes up the 'input' in the framing processes (e.g. Gammelsæter, 2010; Nite et al., 2013; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Southall et al., 2009). Translated to the present context, this means that a wide variety of issues are simultaneously or in overlap 'on the table' in everyday organizational life, in this case, the ongoing work of sport club boards. As a consequence, there is an ever-changing, organization-specific 'pool' of extant cultural material in the shape of problem–solutions. At any given time and for any given organization, this pool represents what is currently 'on the table', and which therefore is close at hand as cultural material in subsequent meaning-making processes. We term such contemporaneous and temporally extended problem–solution constructions *pools of*

proximate institutional raw material. Using these concepts, we argue, makes it is possible to construct a more fine-grained description and understanding of the pluralistic character of 'input' that is somewhat at odds with previous depictions of institutional pressures in the sport management literature as isolated temporally and spatially (e.g. Perck et al., 2016; Vos et al., 2011).

Problem–solution approximation

The characteristics denoted by the concept of pools of proximate raw material constitute the substantive prerequisite for organizational actors to make seemingly unrelated issues relate to each other in processes that we term *problem–solution approximation*. Examples of such processes in our analysis are the approximation of (a) a workplace inspection with an immigrant integration project (Illustration 1) and (b) recruitment of players with employment and housing agency practices (Illustration 2). In such processes, the focal organization's pool of proximate institutional raw material is used in processes where problem–solution constructions are reframed so that they 'fit' with and thereby make sense of and deal with other issues. Such an understanding is different from explanations provided in the sport management literature thus far. At the very core of this difference lies our claim that one specific organizational action is not necessarily a response to the institutional pressure under study, as contended elsewhere in the sport management literature (cf. Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Paramio-Salacines & Kitchin, 2013). It can equally plausible be a response to a more proximal, yet unrelated, problem.

Problem–solution approximation is made possible precisely because several issues are treated simultaneously or in overlap (as shown in Tables 1 and 2) and because pools of proximate institutional raw material are pluralistic, containing a diverse range of issues, each bearing marks of different macro-institutional ideas. Put differently, problem–solution constructions pertaining to one issue, because they are culturally and temporally proximate, can be 'pasted to' other issues. From this follows that the meanings created through a problem–solution approximation become part of the focal organization's ever-changing pool of proximate institutional raw material, thus feeding into future problem–solution approximations.

Problem–solution approximation, we claim, is a key process by which organizational actors muddle through everyday organizational life. This does not mean that organizations do not strategize or strategically connect (or at least attempt to) with currently fashionable ideas (Røvik, 1998) in order to gain or maintain legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) with stakeholders. To reiterate, interpretive work is intentional, purposive, and skilful, which is evidenced not least by the display of actors' abilities to make meaningful connections between seemingly disparate issues in our analysis. Problem–solution approximation, however, hinges on the possibility to create connections between issues. In that sense, while actors cannot relate to what is wholly unrecognizable to them (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), they are very skilled at approximating what is in any way recognizable.

Institutional effects of problem–solution approximation

So far, we have explicated the processes by which 'input' is transformed through processes of problem–solution approximation. The immediate effect of such processes, as stated

above, is that new problem–solution constructions are added to the focal organization's pool of proximate institutional raw material. However, this ideational aspect of problem–solution approximation is coupled with practices that generate concrete consequences. As aptly put by Zilber (2008, p. 152): 'Meanings are encoded in structures and practices, while structures and practices express and affect those meanings.' In the present context, this means that talk, text, and actions are 'output'– 'real' consequences of processes of problem–solution approximation. Such talk, text, and actions contain seeds for institutional change because once externalized, they contribute to the production of broader macro-institutional ideas, and they also become available as concrete templates for other organizations' mimetic processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

A key point resulting from our analysis is that meaning-making processes in organizations may not only reproduce macro-institutional ideas. Because problem–solution approximation involves the tailoring of a connection between two initially disparate ideas, such processes also have the potential to contribute to the production of completely different macro-institutional ideas. This conferring of cultural meaning to different macro-institutional ideas is displayed in Table 3, in which issues, when they enter the boardroom, are bestowed cultural meaning from the particular macro-institutional ideas of 'general regulative trends' (Illustration 1) and 'professionalization' (Illustration 2), respectively, and when they exit, confer cultural meaning to the quite different macro-institutional ideas of 'the governmentalization of sport' (Illustration 1) and 'the commercialization sport' (Illustration 2), respectively. Institutional logics researchers (e.g. Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) would perhaps say that an issue that enters the organization as the concrete expression of one institutional logic exits as a concrete expression of another.

As we have hoped to show in our analysis, processes of problem–solution approximation are generally not aimed at achieving either institutional reproduction or change, but towards much more mundane and organization-specific problems and their solutions. Such processes have institutional effects, but their achievement is not the intention underpinning them. In that sense, and as Powell and Colyvas (2008) suggested, we understand both institutional reproduction and change as mainly unintended consequences of muddling through, here conceptualized as problem–solution approximation.

Concluding remarks, limitations, suggestions for future research, and practical implications

With this paper, we have sought to contribute to an extension of theory by way of constructing new concepts that add to the idea vitality of a distinctive sport management discipline and accrue to the understanding of contemporary processes of change in the sport management context. We argue that the concepts of pools of proximate institutional raw material and problem–solution approximation have such potential. Relating to the first, such a concept is needed to aid in the deconstruction of often indistinct conceptualizations of macro-institutional ideas, thus being able to more precisely pinpoint the content of the raw material thought of as input in organizational processes. Relative to the latter, a processual concept finds its virtue in its capacity to conceptualize the muddling through of everyday organizational life as the micro-foundation of institutional reproduction and change.

However, even if these basic tenets of our conceptualizations are accepted, they undoubtedly need more empirical and theoretical attention. This need stems especially from one of the methodological limitations of this study. By 'taking the perspective of the organization' this study has not been able to capture actual consequences of organizations' talk, text, and actions as they leave the organization. That is, that the talk, text, and actions of one organization are the institutional context of another organization. To uncover repercussions of these actions in the institutional context, it is important that future studies try to incorporate a set of organizations in reciprocal relationships with each other. Also, because many analyses of institutional processes have been inclined to 'black-box' the 'input' of macro-institutional ideas in organizations and instead place focus on organizations' structures, processes, and practices as effects of this input, we would like to underscore the importance of specifying the ideational content of the input used as the 'independent' variable. Highlighted by our suggestion to study the consequences of one organization's talk, text, and actions for other organizations, we would like to point to the importance of paying heed to this reciprocity at both 'ends' of a focal organization.

Finally, we would like to highlight a few practical and policy implications. We suggest that awareness of the workings of processes of problem-solution approximation sequences would make both sport organizations and policy-makers better equipped to consider whether their actions might lead to the momentum of processes that they essentially find unwanted and adverse to their needs and wishes. By pointing to how meaning-making around one particular issue feeds into or is 'pasted to' other issues, we hope to draw attention to the fact that while the problem–solution approximation can be very functional for one specific purpose, it can be unfit if not harmful for other purposes also valued by the organization or its stakeholders. Being aware of such processes could enable decision-makers in both policy and practice to consider the 'net value' of decisions made relative to potential trade-offs. More specifically, we would like to argue that being aware of the processes we have tried to conceptualize can help sport managers and policy-makers to deconstruct rationales for decisions and action, thereby hopefully being better equipped to tailor more precise solutions with less trade-offs.

Note

1. Although we acknowledge the empirical and analytical distinction, the term 'organizational actor' is here interchangeably used to denote individuals acting in organizational contexts (e.g. board members) and organizations as a whole (e.g. competing sport organizations).

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